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Introduction

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This special issue of *Jewish Culture and History* arose from an international conference on ‘Jewish Identities in Contemporary Europe’, which was held in April 2011 at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies in London. Less than two years before, in May 2009, an article had appeared in the *The Guardian* posing the question: “What is the future for Europe’s Jews?”.¹ Its subtitle, ‘What vision of the Jewish community in Europe will allow it to flourish – is it independent and creative, or an embattled outpost of Israel?’, pointed to the issue that has been at the centre of debate among Jews themselves ever since the state of Israel was established in 1948: the relationship between the state of Israel and the Jewish diaspora.

Until the 1990s this relationship mainly ruled the debate among Jews. Since the start of the Intifada, and in particular since the second Intifada, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has brought Jews who live outside Israel into the focus also of the non-Jewish media and scholarly debate. While attention has been directed at Israel and the volatile situation in the Middle East, few have noticed the fundamental changes European Jewry has undergone, especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union. The aim of our conference was to focus on Jews in Europe. Although their relations with and views on Israel constituted an important topic of enquiry, it was only one, and by no means the most important one, among a number of questions speakers addressed.

In the introduction to his 1998 anthology of British Jewish literature Bryan Cheyette pointed out the importance of the national context, in which British diaspora Jews live for the texts they produce.² Arguably, the national context is even more relevant for Jews who live in other European countries, where recent developments have led to significant differences in the size and makeup of the Jewish minority. While numbers of British Jewry – at just under 300,000 today the second largest in

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Europe –, were boosted by exiles from Nazi Germany, many of whom decided to remain in their country of refuge after the Second World War had ended, Sephardic immigrants from North Africa make up a sizeable proportion of Jews in France, where the largest number of European Jews live today (about 600,000). The situation is different again in Germany and Austria, whose Jewries in the post-war years struggled to recover from their radical depletion in the Holocaust. By the late 1970s and early 1980s communities were rapidly aging, with many younger Jews emigrating to Israel and the United States thus further draining these communities. Simultaneously, Jewish culture became increasingly the preoccupation of non-Jewish artists performing for non-Jewish audiences. This led the American writer and photographer Ruth Ellen Gruber to observe that Jewishness in the former Central European heartlands of Jewish population is of a mere virtual character.³ Yet this situation changed fundamentally when the administration of the GDR of the 1980s offered to accept Jews from the Soviet Union. After reunification in 1989 the new Germany decided to honor this initiative, resulting in the arrival of between 100,000 and 200,000 Russian Jewish immigrants during the 1990s.⁴ Although integration of these so-called *Kontingentflüchtlinge* (quota refugees) into the existing, predominantly conservative Jewish communities in Germany has proved challenging, the arrivals from the former Soviet Union have also boosted numbers in these communities, helping to secure their viability.⁵

Apart from these historical developments, widely differing relations to state and to national cultural memory have produced significant inflections in community identity among Jews of different European countries. Moreover, their relationships with a growing Islamic population in Europe, whose numbers have not only far surpassed those of the Jewish minorities but who are also more visible in the host societies, constitute new challenges for the Jews. Since the spectacular events of 9/11 and the later attacks in Europe, Jews have had to review their position vis-à-vis the Christian majority as well a large group of Muslim immigrants.

Against this historical and national backdrop, the conference's principal present- and future-oriented question pertained to the meaning of being Jewish today in European countries such as Austria, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, and to what extent this experience is shaped by factors that lie outside the national context. These are questions to which Jewish writers and intellectuals are, in 2013, still actively seeking answers. As had already been pointed out by the intellectual historian Diana

Pinto, whose contribution features in this issue, Jews in today's Europe increasingly see themselves as part of a European community.⁶ Jews in Germany, for instance, featured well into the 1990s mainly in discourses of commemoration, such as in the call for a historicisation of the Holocaust during the so-called Historians' Debate of 1986; or in the debate about the Berlin Holocaust Memorial. Since reunification the debate, at least among Jews, has been oriented towards the future. Although in France, in 1995 President Jacques Chirac publicly apologised for the French state's implication in the Holocaust, the re-emergence of anti-Semitism in the 1970s and 1980s and the rise of revisionism and negationism was followed by new forms of anti-Semitism since the Second Intifada and, most recently, the war in Gaza. These events have triggered complex cultural reactions from descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors and new immigrants. There is also evidence in the print media, on television and, increasingly, on the internet that Jews are becoming more self-confident. They not only react to Judeophobic actions but are once more playing a significant role in the public sphere of these countries and beyond. The conference therefore both sought to investigate how the relationships of Jews to the countries in which they live have been shaped by recent historical and political events, and it aimed to demonstrate how Jewish identity in Europe is marked by transnational allegiances, and the extent to which Jews might be seen as leading the way in establishing a post-national existence.

The conference covered both a wide range of topics and several distinct forms of cultural and discursive expression. Panels focused on media such as film and literature; on issues of space, place and belonging, as well as on intellectual debates. Three stimulating keynote papers engaged with the key questions: the relationship between Europe's Jews and Israel (Matti Bunzl); the questions of acculturation (Sue Vice); and Jewish identity in contemporary Europe (Diana Pinto). A screening of Ruth Beckermann's 2006 film *Zorro's Bar Mitzva* demonstrated the diversity of Jewish cultural practice in contemporary Vienna. The ensuing discussion with the filmmaker showed that there is little agreement, even among Jews themselves, about the merits of the increased visibility of Jews in the non-Jewish environment.

This volume assembles a selection of the conference papers, which have been revised for publication. The editors' aim could not be to offer an exhaustive and definitive image of current Jewish culture in Europe. Instead we hope to give the reader a number of snapshots of contemporary Jewish studies in Europe, showcasing their varied topics of engagement. This special issue of *Jewish Culture and History* opens

with a consideration of the different 'Jewish spaces' in which Jews find themselves in contemporary Europe (Pinto). It is followed by essays on Jewish philosophy and film in France (Decout, Ségeral), on Jewish literature in Britain and Germany (Vice, Stähler, Codrai), on Jewish artists in Poland and Israel (Popescu), and on the identity of Israeli expats in Britain (Moshkovitz). The volume concludes with Ruth Beckermann's essay 'Growing Up in Vienna' which is published here for the first time in English translation.

Notes

¹ Antony Lerman, 'What is the future for Europe's Jews?', *The Guardian*, 16.5.2009. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/may/16/europe-jewish-community>> (accessed 8.5.2013).

² Bryan Cheyette, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland. An Anthology*, ed. Bryan Cheyette (London: Peter Halban, 1998), XIII-LXXI.

³ Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002).

⁴ Y. Michal Bodemann, "Introduction," in *The New German Jewry and the European context. The Return of the European Diaspora*, ed. Y. Michal Bodemann (New Perspectives in German Studies, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1-9; Julius H. Schoeps and Olaf Glöckner, "Fifteen Years of Russian-Jewish Immigration to Germany: Successes and Setbacks," in *Ibid.*, 144-157.

⁵ Austria's Jewish community in Vienna has also benefitted from the immigration of Jews from Russia although the majority of them had belonged to the Sephardic communities of Georgia and Bukhara (see Andrea Reiter *Contemporary Jewish Writers: Austria after Waldheim* [New York: Routledge, forthcoming]).

⁶ Diana Pinto: "European Jewish Review," in *Golem. Europäisch-jüdisches Magazin*, 1/12 (1999), <http://www.hagalil.com/golem/jewish-identity/review.htm> (accessed 8.5. 2013).